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Citation:

Kakos, M and Fritzsche, B (2017) A Meta-Ethnography of two Studies on Interactions in schools. Reflections on the Process of Translation. *Ethnography and Education*, 12 (2). pp. 228-242. ISSN 1745-7831 DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17457823.2016.1216324>

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**A Meta-ethnography of two studies on Interactions in Schools. Reflections on the Process of Translation**

**(7668 words, 6856 excluding abstract and references)**

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**Acknowledgements:**

- This work was supported by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (German Research Foundation) under Grant FR 2846/3-1.
- The authors would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their careful reading of the drafts and for their insightful comments and suggestions.

**ABSTRACT**

This paper reflects upon our experience gained from engagement in a meta-ethnography of two studies on interactions between teachers and students in schools situated in England and Germany. Starting with a short overview of Noblit and Hare’s (1998) conceptualisation of the method, the paper outlines the meta-ethnography we undertook especially focussing on the process of translation. We present the findings of our study which show teachers’ understanding of the pastoral aspect of their role as incompatible with demands related to their performance and to those associated with their institutional responsibilities. We show

also how attempts to develop personalised interactions with students may reinforce students' vulnerability. Our final discussion contributes our own deliberations about the potentials and challenges of the method, especially in relation to the role of the ethnographers and their relationship to the meta-ethnographic field.

## 1. Introduction

Ethnographic research is generally associated with the in-depth study of one or a small number of cases, focusing on the emergence of meanings within everyday contexts (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007: 3). It is therefore a particularly useful approach when exploring the impact of local conditions on situated practices.

Human activity and meaning are rarely (if ever) developed in isolated settings. Marcus (1995) argues that sites of human activity, including those of formal education (Pierides, 2010), are interconnected with, and increasingly interdependent upon, a wide range of factors, both local and global. The complex interplay of these factors is one of the fields in which comparative research has been traditionally considered as of value. Approaches focussing on the overcoming of too narrow a focus on local conditions (particularly within the field of ethnography) consist of multi-sited ethnography, as introduced by Marcus (1995) and meta-ethnography as an approach to synthesising understanding from ethnographic accounts (Noblit and Hare 1988: 10). The latter approach has initiated the argument of this paper, whose focus is on the implementation of the method with the aim of presenting and discussing a number of epistemological and methodological challenges identified in the course of our research. The aim of the current paper is to present a number of questions that have resulted from the development of our thinking in relation to the identified challenges.

## 2. The process of translation in Meta-ethnography

In relation to meta-analysis, forms of qualitative synthesis have emphasised the need for it to be sensitive to the distinctive character of qualitative work (Hammersley 2013: 132). Meta-ethnography, as developed by George W. Noblit and Dwight Hare in 1988, is an approach to synthesising understanding from ethnographic accounts. It is inductive and interpretive in character (ibid:16) and therefore focuses on constructing interpretations, rather than analyses (ibid: 11), i.e. "using the findings of existing case studies, meta-ethnographers ...to construct new interpretations for the cases selected" (Doyle, 2003: 325). Noblit and Hare identify an

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important goal of interpretivism as being the enrichment of human discourse, and thus regard evidence of the success of meta-ethnography as lying in the debate that meta-ethnographic synthesis generates rather than the synthesis itself (ibid:35). The focus of meta-ethnography is therefore not on the data collected, but on the interpretations of the concepts and on the metaphors employed to guide and describe the analysis.

Noblit and Hare have proposed a systematic means of achieving this outcome, consisting of seven discrete stages. The first phase consists of identifying an intellectual interest, along with the process of selecting the studies employed, which may focus on different aspects of a phenomenon and/or share a similar focus, but have been conducted in different settings (ibid, 36-9). Noblit and Hare suggest that researchers need to decide during the following three phases which aspects are relevant to the initial interest (stage 2), reading the studies (stage 3) and determine the ways in which the studies are related (stage 4). The meta-ethnographic analysis subsequently reaches the synthesis stage which involves the translation of each study into one-another (stage 5).

Noblit and Hare drawing from Turner’s conceptualisation (Turner, 1980) appear to understand translation as being rooted in comparison. In meta-ethnography, however, translation goes beyond comparison, taking the form of the fertilisation of the understanding of one setting with the use of metaphors resulting from the study of another, i.e. “More involved than an analogy” (Noblit and Hare, 1988: 28). The data for translation in meta-ethnography is ‘interpretations and explanations rather than the data collected through interview and observations (ibid, 32) and this is what makes translation one of most distinctive elements of meta-ethnography. This process sheds new light on ethnographic settings, allows new perspectives on the original studies, in depth understandings of the studied phenomena leading to (as well as being led by) the development of new conceptualisations (Doyle, 2003: 339). In the case of meta-ethnographies involving large number of original studies an additional stage of synthesis of translations (stage 6) may be required in which various translations are compared with one another and competing interpretations are further analysed. New conceptualisations are then expressed and described in the seventh, and final, stage of meta-ethnography.

The focus on the interpretations (along with their central process of translation in relation to the results of further ethnographic studies) is believed to allow meta-ethnography to “resemble the qualitative methods of the studies it aims to synthesise” (Britten et al., 2002:

210), thus remaining methodologically consistent with the methods and approaches employed by the original studies. Meta-ethnographic synthesis therefore aims to bring together the “substance of qualitative research” (Noblit and Hare, 1988: 81), leading to the production of “novel and important insights even in fields which appear to have been thoroughly investigated” (Campbell et al., 2011). This result is viewed as being more illuminating than synthesis through aggregative analysis and generalisation (Campbell et al., 2011: 122; Doyle, 2003: 322).

Although meta-ethnography as conceptualised by Noblit and Hare originates from synthesis of educational ethnographies (Noblit and Hare, 1983 and 1988) the method has found its most frequent application in the health sciences (Savin Baden et al, 2008: 213) and it remains largely underused amongst educational researchers.

### 3. Our meta-ethnography

The meta-ethnography presented here is a synthesis of two educational ethnographies. The study is consistent with the meta-ethnographic tradition set by Noblit & Hare, in that it consists of studies sharing the same focus (Noblit & Hare, 1988; 26; Beach et al, 2013: 257) but whose approach follows differing theoretical traditions (Noblit & Hare, 1983:12; Doyle, 2003: 327). It differs from other meta-ethnographies in that its aim has not been the ‘management of a large range of literature from the interpretivist tradition’ (Savin Baden et al, 2008: 213) and in the fact that the selection of the ethnographies preceded, rather than followed, the framing of the research questions. This is because this meta-ethnography formed the outcome of an attempt to systematise a meta-analysis which was organically developed from our discussions about our original ethnographies and their findings. This has generated an additional responsibility to constantly re-visit and re-evaluate the significance of the research questions, along with the appropriateness of these studies in answering them. It is also accompanied by exposure of the developing analysis to other researchers.

#### 3.1. The two studies

Both studies focused on interactions between teachers and students, one (Study 1) was undertaken in a secondary school in England (Author 1, 2008; 2012) and the other (Study 2) in two primary schools: one situated in England and the other in Germany (Author 2, 2013; 2014). By the time we made contact with each other, Study 1 had been finalised, while Study 2 was completed during the period in which the meta-ethnography was conducted. Our meta-

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ethnography therefore differs in this respect also from the original concept presented by Noblit and Hare, due to their assumption that this method is undertaken with studies that have been completed.

The first study was a case study of a comprehensive secondary school in the north of England, and focussed on the interactions between the students and teachers in Citizenship Education. In terms of its conceptual framework, the study was placed within the interactionist ethnography paradigm (Castanheira et al., 2001). Its principal aim was to study 'the school community's engagement with educational practices, policies and the curriculum of citizenship education operating within a discourse of performativity (Ball, 2003). The underlying assumption of the study was that the 'business-like discourse' (Pring, 1999), along with the new professionalism suggested by performativity, had the potential to hinder attempts to construct personalised interactions appropriate for citizenship education.

The study employed both whole-school and classroom observations, with evidence being obtained from interviews with both students and teachers, supported by field notes, during a six-month engagement in the life of the school. Data was also collected from observations of a set of role-plays, followed by group interviews with students. The study suggested the dominance of a depersonalised, conformist perception of each other's identity in the interaction between students and teachers, largely based on their institutional roles. The study also discussed the struggles of teachers to deal with the reported incompatibility of such a model of interaction with pedagogies appropriate for citizenship education. The key metaphors employed to describe the analysis and support the development of this argument were: (a) interaction avoidance; (b) 'flexible' and 'inflexible' performances; (c) 'imposed contract'; (d) the 'invisible audience'.

The phenomenon of an avoidance of out-of-role interaction refers to the systematic avoidance of both students and teachers to engage in interactions not directly related to their institutional roles within the school. Both described the discomfort they experience when it becomes necessary to interact socially and this discomfort was also observed during breaks and fieldtrips. In the analysis, this avoidance was associated with the dominance of 'inflexible performances', i.e. the prevalence of interactions constructed by limited and closed-ended negotiations. During flexible performances, however, these negotiations appeared to be more open-ended, and the process of interaction appeared to allow increased opportunities for the interacting parties to express their own preferences and direct the processes of constructed

performances. Both flexible performance and open-ended negotiations exist within the school, but teachers and students appear to dissociate them from the *raison d'être* of formal education and its prevailing societal role, described in guidelines as the drafting of an 'imposed contract'. This aspect is employed to discuss the perception shared by teachers and students that their interaction is guided by the terms of an agreement which controls and guides their relationship, with their interaction designed to lead teachers to professional recognition and students to access specific 'goods'.

The contractual agreement between students and teachers appears to be guided by 'specifications' defined by agencies external to the interacting parts, including the school's management team, the government (including Ofsted inspection teams) and the students' parents. This 'invisible audience' not only holds the authority to evaluate teachers' performance, but, in doing so, it effectively scripts their performance. This process, however, supports the de-personalisation of teachers' interactions with students, who, as noted by Pring (1999), are transformed from participants in this interaction to 'clients' and then to mere 'products'. Teachers, in particular, find it difficult to alter the model of their interaction with students, due to being trapped within this process, and in the roles it imposes. Hence, they find it challenging to develop any shared ownership of the school with their students, and gain sufficient space for meaningful participation and for democratic pedagogies. Inevitably, the implementation of citizenship education has fluctuated between didactic pedagogies of questionable appropriateness, and the invisibility of curriculum subjects which the school community deems as being of low relevance, significance, and status.

The second ethnographic research project in our synthesis was into the 'Relations of Recognition in Urban Primary Schools'. This analysed the relationships between teachers and students in two inner city primary schools, situated in London and Berlin.

The starting point of the project was the assumption that modern inner city primary schools are confronted with similar challenges, as they, in addition to a narrow budget, are often visited by diverse and predominantly socially deprived students (Maguire et al. 2006: 32). Likewise, it was assumed that these challenges are met on different grounds, since relationships between teachers and students in England and Germany are embedded in quite different conditions at the level of policy, institutions and a varying history of mentalities. On the basis of a cross-cultural comparative ethnography, of course no generalising assumptions can be made about relationships between teachers and students in Germany and England.



However, analysed differences in patterns of relationships in the London school compared to the Berlin school can be discussed in relation to the mentioned different conditions for those relationships in both countries. In order to conduct such comparison the original research project had to consider other educational work on relationships and interactions of teachers and students in England and Germany but then it was further facilitated by the meta-ethnography illustrated in this paper.

The data was collected during two fieldtrips lasting a number of weeks and undertaken within a twelve-month period. It consists of observational records and video recordings of teacher-student interactions in two classes in each school, along with interviews and group discussions with students and various groups of professionals, and official documents (i.e. the schools' mission statements). Interpretation of the data is followed by a discussion of the analysed 'norms of recognition' (Butler, 2004) in relation to the relevant educational research into the historical, institutional and political conditions that frame teacher-student relationships in both England and Germany. Following Butler (2004, 2005), recognition is regarded as part of every act of addressing that takes place between individuals and which is always framed by norms. 'Norms of recognition' can be explicit, but as they can be regarded as normalising principles within social practice; they mostly operate implicitly, and are predominantly recognisable through their effects (Butler, 2004:42). These norms are not to be understood as superstructures in relation to social practices, but are rather to be reproduced and idealised in these practices. We come into contact with norms through living exchanges in the modes by which we are addressed (Butler, 2005: 30).

In this study, it was possible to distinguish between classroom interactions between teachers and students involving family and peer-culture subjects, and classroom interactions focused on instruction. Whereas the former pattern of interaction was framed by a norm of recognising students as 'whole persons', the latter was framed by a norm of recognising them in their roles as learners.

In Berlin (although not in London), it was observed that students were encouraged to discuss family matters and peer relationships during lessons. This included a 'circle time' held on Monday morning, which was used for relating events that had taken place over the weekend. Thus, a blending of 'private' and 'academic' subjects during lessons was observed in Berlin. In London, however, the boundaries between school and the subjects of lessons on one hand,



and family and peer-culture on the other, were drawn comparatively strictly. Here ‘circle time’ was used for discussions on ethical questions, during which private topics were avoided.

On the other hand, interactions initiated by teachers addressing individual students framed by a norm of care, could be distinguished from those initiated by teachers addressing the whole class, and appeared to be influenced by the norm of non-discrimination. Interactions framed by a norm of care involved increased physical contact with, and attention to, individual students. This was demonstrated when a student with Special Educational Needs (SEN) was directed towards the blackboard, accompanied with multiple caring touches by two pedagogues. Interactions framed by the norm of care could be observed more frequently in classes with younger students, and appears to occur more frequently in London than in Berlin.

Regarding the level of attitudes, all professionals interviewed at the schools explained that ‘care’ is very important for their work. In London, ‘pastoral care’ is associated with the knowledge of students’ home environment, with the school’s responsibility encompassing personal problems that might result from a problematic home life, while in Berlin a sense of responsibility for students as a ‘whole person’ was expressed by allowing personal matters to underpin the content of lessons. In London, teachers identified further professionals at the school (e.g. teaching assistants, SEN coordinators, etc.) as being responsible for dealing with personal problems. Thus, teachers’ professional practices appeared to be structured more by clearly defined teacher roles in London than in Berlin.

The study clarifies the fact that interactions between teachers and students are framed by a number of different (and, at times) contradictory norms. Butler (2006:43) argues that the vulnerability implicit in all subjects is also regulated by norms of recognition, due to the fact that vulnerability needs to be perceived and recognised in order for it to come into play in an ethical encounter. When it comes to observed relationships, the norm of care appears to be a reaction to students’ assumed vulnerabilities. At the same time, teachers’ modes of addressing individual students perceived as being particularly vulnerable (e.g. students with ‘special educational needs’) can be interpreted as a subjectification of these students as vulnerable. These modes of address can serve to reinforce the students’ vulnerability by adding to their sense of exclusion. Similarly, ambivalent effects can be identified in relation to the norm of recognising students as ‘whole persons’, which appears to lead to unclear roles

in the classroom, and thus create vulnerabilities. Students' statements hint at their desire for the establishment to protect them by setting clear roles and, at times, by 'strict' teachers. On the other hand, interactions initiated by teachers framed by a norm of recognising students in their role as learners, denies the students their right to any vulnerability unrelated to this role. For example, in London it was observed that a student was forbidden to console a friend who was upset while a lesson was taking place, even being forced to sit elsewhere.

### 3.2. Method of analysis

The meta-ethnography was developed over the course of an intense exchange of papers and emails, along with a number of meetings in the UK and Germany. As has already been noted, initial discussions were instigated by the similarity in the focus of the two studies, which was subsequently more systematically explored. Loosely associated with stage 4 in Noblit and Hare's description, these discussions allowed us to list both the differences and similarities of the studies, as outlined in the table below.

**Table 1**

<b>Differences</b>		<b>Study 1 (2008, 2012)</b>	<b>Study 2 (2013, 2014)</b>
	Methodology	Case study	Comparative
	Field	Secondary education	Primary education
	Conceptual framework and analysis	Interactionist analysis of the process of co-construction of participants' experiences and of their roles	Butler's concept of recognition
<b>Similarities</b>		1. Interaction between students and teachers	
		2. Subjects' interdependence	
		3. The description of teachers' struggles to balance two models of interaction (i.e. professional/institutional and personal) and on their perceptions concerning the incompatibility of the two models	

At this stage, before entering into the process of the systematic translation of concepts from the studies, we recognised the need to clearly state the common focus to guide the process of synthesis. Due to the fact that our meta-ethnographic analysis was built upon pre-selected ethnographies, stating the common focus required a move backwards to the first step of meta-

ethnographic process as described by Noblit & Hare, and it can be described as the identification of the common intellectual interest (1988: 26-7). Having already identified the ways that the studies were related we had the opportunity to select this common focus from the list of similarities of the two studies, this being *The tension between personalised and institutionalised interactions and roles* (based on similarity 3, table 1). The exploration started with the development of a number of questions, and finally to the research questions for the meta-ethnography (Doyle, 2003: 330):

- *How do teachers and students relate to the subjects/roles constructed by their interaction when they reflect upon this interaction?*
- *What is the role of (pastoral) care in students' and teachers' engagement, and in teachers' professionalism in their interactions with students?*

With the two questions above setting the direction of the analysis, the meta-ethnographic process entered the stage of synthesis. The first step into this stage involved the translation of the studies into one another. Our search for guidance in systematising this process led us to agree with Doyle's observation about the limited guidance offered by Noblit & Hare on the use of metaphors (2003:332). Similar processes as applied in other meta-ethnographies seemed to be of limited help as they seemed to be unable to respond to the unique qualities of this meta-ethnography which involves only two studies conducted by the same researchers. This forced us to innovate in the way that we interpreted Noblit and Hare's suggestions and applied meta-ethnographic translation.

At first we followed Noblit and Hare's suggestion that translations should maintain the central metaphors of each account in their relation to other key metaphors or concepts in that account (1988: 28). For this, we identified metaphors used in the two original studies which we considered as particularly relevant to the focus of our meta-ethnography. These were recorded together with their corresponding meanings in two separate lists (one for each ethnography). We then merged the two lists bringing together those metaphors and meanings from the two ethnographies which we identified as bearing strong similarities with each other. At the next stage metaphors drawn from one ethnography were applied upon compatible meanings from the other. The purpose of this was to facilitate synthesis but it had the additional gain of leading to reinterpretation of the original meanings and of (elements of) the original analysis. Reinterpretations which both ethnographers considered as being meaningful, originals and could resonate with the findings from the original ethnographies

were then further discussed aiming towards synthesis of interpretations i.e. towards the production of interpretations corresponding to metaphors drawn from both ethnographies. These single interpretations worked as common denominators which were then projected upon the original analysis of the two projects leading to the construction of a new analysis based on synthesis (See table 2). In that way, translation in the way that it was applied in this meta-ethnography became a five step-process which involved: metaphor imposition → translation → reinterpretation → discussion → synthesis. The process allowed the grounding of new narratives on both original projects while at the same time reframed the claims made in both ethnographies. These new narratives became the pathways for our engagement with the Research Questions of our meta-ethnography or the descriptors of the emerged meta-ethnographic field from which we drew our responses to these questions.

Table 2

	Study 1	Study 2	New narratives (Suggestions, Findings and Claims)
Metaphor	Invisible audience	Norms of recognition	The third position which assigns meaning to the interaction is embedded in this interaction. Subjects recognise each other, trap each other in this recognition pattern limiting for themselves the possibilities for exploitation of the (perhaps already limited) opportunities to own and reframe the interaction.
Synthesis	Participants' perceptions concerning their interactions taking place in the frame of the expectations of a third position		
Metaphor	Interaction avoidance	Norm of recognition of students in their roles as learners	Even when such opportunities arise (out-of-role interactions) teachers and students are reluctant to recognise themselves otherwise. Instead, they tend to avoid such interactions when possible.
Synthesis	Reluctance of actors to undertake interactions not directly related to their institutional roles within the school		
Metaphor	Flexible vs. Inflexible performances	Vulnerability associated with recognition as 'whole persons'	When such interactions are unavoidable, they tend to seek refuge to their institutional roles to which they revert provoking the recognition of each other and of themselves within the institutional divide of learners and teachers.
Synthesis	Preference to interactions clearly focusing on instructional matters as personal interactions are confusing / stressful		
Further Steps			<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Power / control / Vulnerability</li><li>• Space for pastoral care</li><li>• Country specific characteristics</li></ul>

### 3.3 Meta-ethnographic analysis

Looking for answers to the first research question led us to the observation that both studies describe teachers' and students' perceptions concerning their interactions taking place in the frame of expectations which are external to them. In Study 1, this third position is described using the metaphor of an 'invisible audience', and in Study 2 through the metaphor of 'norms of recognition'. Study 1 describes teachers and students as being reluctant to undertake interactions not directly related to their institutional roles within the school, i.e. that do not explicitly correspond to the model of interactions that seem to be of interest for the 'invisible audience'. The study describes this pattern using the metaphor of 'interaction avoidance', which corresponds with the patterns of interactions described in Study 2 as being framed by a "norm of recognising students in their roles as learners". However, the metaphor of 'interaction avoidance' also takes into account the position of teachers, who are described as being equally structured by their institutional role.

Interactions clearly focusing on instructional matters can be characterised as 'inflexible performances', due to the fact that they are constructed by limited and closed-ended negotiations. In Study 2, these are framed by a "norm of recognising students as learners", in relation to the distinction in Study 1 between 'inflexible performances' and 'flexible performances', where 'flexible performances' allow increased space in which interacting parties are able to express their personal preferences. Thus, interactions described in Study 2 as involving subjects related to family and peer culture can be described as 'flexible performances'.

Even in cases when inflexible performances permit involved parties little space to express their own preferences, a number of students in both studies (in Study 1 this also included teachers) expressed a preference for these patterns of interaction. Study 1 clarifies the fact that a preference for 'contractual relationships' with teachers is particularly strong among high-achieving, and older, students who have internalised school principals and hierarchies.

The preference of inflexible performances observed in Study 1 when seen together with students' reactions to the flexible performances observed in a German school (Study 2) reveal that more personal (and simultaneously more encompassing) teacher-student relationships appear to be prone to result in conflict. This can be seen as a result of the students' sense of confusion concerning both what to expect, and what is expected from them in their relationships with teachers while at the same time they feel they are made vulnerable by the

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schools’ endeavours to address them as ‘whole people’. The teacher-student relationship observed in the English schools was comparatively more formal and structured by roles, and therefore appears less prone to producing conflict. It also corresponds to the desire of older students to protect their private sphere from the school. This desire was identified in Study 1, as well as in further studies (both English and German) concerning the attitudes of secondary school students towards school (Breidenstein, 2006; Watkins, 2008; Baltruschat, 2010). At the same time, this creates a difficulty in settling the professional claim of employing pastoral care in order to create humanised and informal relationships with students.

It seems therefore that the preference of students for roles that are inflexible can be detected in both studies (clearly stated in Study 1, implied in study 2) and this is also accompanied by a desire for their teachers to maintain control within the classroom. The observation hints at the students’ sense of vulnerability when in school. Viewed from such angle, the observation in Study 1 that students with advantages of achievement and age find it easier to deal with flexible performances may be justified not only on the basis of their internalisation of school principals and hierarchies but also on their holding a more powerful position and are therefore better equipped and prepared to protect themselves in the vulnerable position to which flexible interactions may assign them. The discussion in Study 2 of the exclusionary effects of an individualistic and caring means of addressing students with special educational needs allows a tentative conclusion that less formal relationships within a school may disadvantage even further those who are already particularly vulnerable.

This presentation of the key results of our meta-ethnography is concluded with a reference to those observations relating to the differences between the English and German schools in the original ethnographies. It was observed that the patterns of interaction between students and teachers in the English secondary school found in Study 1, and in the English primary school (Study 2), differ from the interactions observed in the German primary school. This reinforces the claims made in Study 2 concerning country-specific differences in the interaction between students and teachers. Relationships between teachers and students in the English schools studied here appear to be more formal and more structured by roles in comparison to those in German schools, which are more informal and diffuse. There may be a number of reasons for this difference. Huf (2015) argues that the performativity of schooling in England may create a need to exercise control over children’s activities, resulting in more formal relationships between teachers and students. The role of ‘safety’ policies (which accompanies an expanding number of rules and regulations designed to



minimise risks to children in educational settings) is also typical for education in the Anglo-American world (McWilliam, 2003; Tobin, 1997; Piper and Stronach, 2008). McWilliam notes that teachers increasingly act as risk-managers:

the institutional priorities have served to shift teachers' attention from 'unique, informal' relationships with the actual bodies of children, to the more formal culture based on the relationship a worker has with the 'expert' information systems through which the performance records of clients and self are managed. (McWilliam, 2003:5)

Such a development also leads to the ethos of (pastoral) care in English schools, momentarily recognised by management via a system of experts with distributed roles, whereas in German primary schools it is played out through a diffusion of teachers' and students' roles.

#### 4. Reflections on the process of translation in meta-ethnography

We need to commence our reflections on our on-going engagement with meta-ethnography by clarifying that (contrary to the impression that might be given by the above description of the analysis) we have not found it to be linear. The suggestions made by Noblit and Hare (in particular their description of the stages of meta-ethnographic analysis) have proved useful in structuring the process. However, even during the development of the current draft, we have not ceased progressing backwards and forwards in relation to these stages. Some descriptions of the process of our analysis are also based on discussions that have taken place retrospectively, some undertaken for the purposes of this paper. Our experience has revealed that such retrospective descriptions (along with reflective accounts of various aspects of the process) have proved essential for the clarification of a particularly complex process (Doyle, 2003: 329). We consider the process of preparing this paper as a *sin qua non* stage of meta-ethnography, as it includes a number of formal (and non-formal) opportunities to communicate our experience with other researchers.

We think that it is almost inevitable that the process of translation draws special attention during meta-ethnographic analysis. This is not only because it is the stage in which the fruits of the meta-ethnographic analysis can be cropped but because of the creativity of the process which allows fresh outcomes from studies which had seemingly fulfilled their potential. We therefore entirely agree with the observation made by Campbell et al that 'reciprocal translation is at the heart of why meta-ethnography is an effective method of qualitative synthesis' Campbell et al., 2011: 122).



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We think that there are four characteristics which marked the process of translation in our meta-ethnography: the fact that the process involves only two ethnographies; the similarity of the area explored by them; the difference in the theoretical framework that guided the original analysis; and our deep knowledge of the two original ethnographies. Therefore, although our meta-ethnography has not been as adventurous as other studies in the use of metaphors and interpretations (Doyle, 2003) or in the number of studies involved (almost all meta-ethnographies referenced here involve meta-analysis of larger number of original studies), it has however benefited by greater in-depth involvement in the changes and enrichment brought by this form of meta-analysis. Furthermore, our meta-ethnography has allowed our interpretations following translation to be firmly grounded on original studies. We maintained original metaphors for as long as possible (similarly to Doyle, op. cit., p. 333) before moving on to the development of a narrative that remains rooted in original ethnographies and which we think that could be still recognisable by the participants in the original ethnographies. At the same time our involvement with the original studies has perhaps restricted us from going very far with our analyses. We associate this with questions about feelings of ownership towards the original ethnographies and to the meaning of the meta-ethnographic field towards which our discussion will turn for the remaining of this section. As departure point for this discussion we will use one of the questions about the use of meta-ethnography posed by Hammersley (2013).

In his epistemological and methodological review of meta-ethnography, Hammersley appears to question the scope and appropriateness of meta-analysis and synthesis of studies which are either representations of organisational cultures, or accounts directly associated with the research questions directing the single studies (Hammersley, 2013: 148). In the case of our own meta-ethnography, the two studies share the premise that discussions are indeed ethnographers' representations of aspects of the studied culture. Indeed, original interpretations were constructed, and supporting data generated, in order to answer specific questions. In the context of meta-ethnography, the complete studies and representations become the fields for new meta-interpretations. Doyle (203: 330) notes that "translation is not a re-interpretation of the same question, but rather becomes an interpretation of interpretations through a new lens". During this process, the original studies do not disappear, and neither do they completely determine this meta-analysis. However, as demonstrated by our own experience with this meta-ethnography (i.e. developed in an organic fashion from discussions between two ethnographers who had been engaged in parallel studies of similar

focus) the choice of appropriate studies (Stake, 2000: 443) leads to an ability to consider the compatibility of the original research questions that governed the original studies. We suggest that this is also due to the fact that, although the meta-ethnographic analysis was not dependent upon primary data generated by the single studies, it did not exclude the communication of the associated meta-interpretations, but took place in a continuous communication between the two. Moreover, since the process of analysis and construction of findings in both studies had been shared and discussed (although neither validated nor disseminated) with the participants of the single studies, the meta-interpretation involved discussions concerning the involvement of the participants with the studies, along with the relationship between the data and results. Consequently, the first stages of the process of meta-ethnographic analysis, and the process of the establishment of a common space between the studies, involved a meta-engagement with the original studies through a process of reflection, defence and emotional catharsis. This was more than a mere re-tuning of our studies to improve their compatibility, but resembled a readjustment of our views concerning our results, and our relationships with the participants and with the fields of the original studies. This is not what Noblit and Hare recognised as translation. However, we believe that this is in fact where translation in meta-ethnography (and the move back and forth on the meta-ethnographic process) commences, and where the answer to the question concerning the scope of the meta-analysis of interpretations partially lies.

We believe that the points raised in the above paragraph also concern another point raised by Hammersley, one which refers to an inconsistency in Noblit and Hare's discussion concerning the meaning of 'translation' (ibid, p. 149). This enables Noblit and Hare to argue the refutable nature of translation, and to draw links between translation and the discovery of truth, while, at the same time, recognising the allegorical dimension of ethnographic interpretations. They thus propose that the aim of such a synthesis is to uncover "the relationships between two existing texts" rather than establish a new analysis (Noblit and Hare, 1988: 66). Although we do not disagree with the observation relating to Noblit and Hare's inconsistency we conclude that this need for methodological clarification does not necessarily impact on the significance of the method. Interpretations found in each study (along with the metaphors employed to describe them) have been particularly useful in re-fertilising our own texts and in developing a new understanding of them through synthesis. Moreover, as already discussed, we consider the discovery of the relationships between the texts, and the construction of a common space (the meta-ethnographic 'field'), as an essential

element of meta-ethnographic analysis and the start of the process of translation. However, we are not of the opinion that this is where the process of translation ends.

However, as we have already hinted, we think that in cases of meta-analysis of ethnographies conducted by the same researchers, translation and re-interpretation require more than the discovery of relationships between texts. Our experience shows that it requires also the establishment of a new relationship of the ethnographers with their original studies. In particular, we have established that at the same time that it guaranteed our commitment in using meta-ethnography in order to achieve greater depth in a field of interest, our engagement in the comparison, translation and synthesis required overcoming of a challenge which relates to our own relationship to the fields of our own ethnographies, and with our sense of ownership in relation to our studies. Similarly (and associated with a sense of collegiality grounded on our shared research interests and the common focus of our studies) we also shared a tendency to protect and (to some extent) overemphasise the uniqueness and distinctiveness of our studies. This aspect had the potential to hinder the process of comparison and synthesis. We are not the first to have raised this issue: in a recent example of such discussion, Drake and Harvey reflect on their ethnographic studies in prisons, referring to “the emotional toll associated with gaining a sense of mastery”. They attribute this to the “high levels of identity performance” during their studies (Drake and Harvey, 2014, p. 495). The intensity of the ethnographic engagement associated with prison research is of a different level to that of school ethnography, however the issue of impression management, along with a form of emotional engagement, appear to be embedded in the work of the ethnographer (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). Our work on meta-ethnography has led us to recognise the identity of performance, and the emotional element of our work, as the sources of the sense of mastery and of ownership over our own ethnographies. In our experience, meta-ethnography has given us the opportunity to negotiate our relationship with our studies, and to explore and construct a new ethnographic field, consisting of the common space between the two ethnographies. This new space is now becoming our new source of mastery and our relationship with this field the cause of a considerable number of questions, and an even greater number of challenges.

**5. Conclusion**

Our aim in this paper has been to describe and reflect upon the process of a juxtaposition of two ethnographic studies undertaken in an educational setting with a particular focus on the

process of translation. The initial informal discussions rapidly led to an exploration of the limitations, and opportunities, for comparison and synthesis of ethnographic studies, initiated by the nature of Atuthor's 2 multi-sited ethnography study. In an attempt to address our concerns related to all factors leading to ethnographic accounts being unique, we sought a method that would allow us to be in control of this process and to systematically develop and describe it to external audiences. We feel that this aim has been effectively served by our interpretation of Noblit and Hare's description of meta-ethnographic methodologies. The discussion of the synthesis stage of our study has demonstrated the opportunities that can be created by meta-ethnography. Our goal was the enrichment of human discourse (Noblit and Hare, 1988: 35), leading us to conclude that our engagement in this meta-ethnographic study has been successful, in that it has led our thinking into areas, and towards observations, we did not find in either of the two single studies. We therefore consider that our developing thinking on the changing role of care in teachers' professional identity is particularly important, as is our exploration of the construction of vulnerability in formal education and its association to childhood. Our research project currently under development (which has emerged from this meta-ethnography and focuses on the concept of care and vulnerability in education) is indicative of the opportunities generated by meta-ethnography.

When it comes to the limitations of the method, and the challenges that enriched our experience, our reflections have been guided to some extent by Hammersley's thoughts on the scope and credibility of the method. Our experience suggests that engagement with meta-ethnography cannot be based on the implementation of a specific *mode d'emploi*, following particular, clear and safe steps, as indicated in Noblit and Hare. Our experience more closely resembles Doyle's experience of a complex system, an engagement with which does not exclude moving back and forth between the set stages (Doyle, 2003: 329; 331).

Beyond certain concerns posed by Hammersley and examined in this paper, our experience has highlighted the fact that engagement with meta-ethnography may be accompanied by a constant effort to maintain a balance between two seemingly opposite tendencies: to protect the particularity and uniqueness of single ethnographies, and to develop generalisations in order to create comparisons. When it comes to the uniqueness of single ethnographies, our experience has led us to understand that dealing with the tendency to defend this uniqueness, and exploring the limitations and opportunities for comparison and synthesis of our ethnographies, has provided a considerably richer experience than we had anticipated. It has become more than an enrichment of our methodological skills, being also an invaluable

contribution towards the expansion of our understanding of our relationship with our field of study, along with our own identities as ethnographers and social researchers.

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